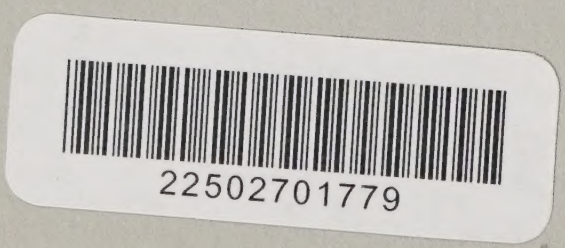
Should Museums be Useful?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By

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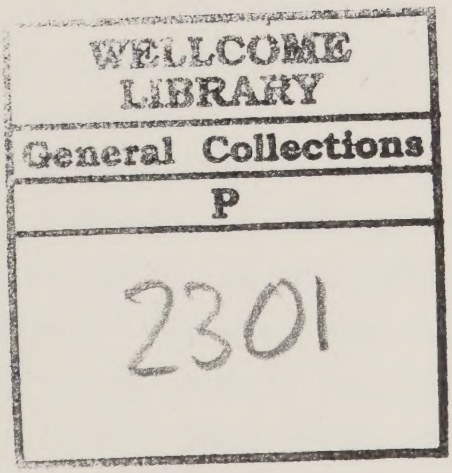
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Should Museums Be Useful?

Museums are now in the air. New ones are springing up in scores of towns and cities; old ones are acquiring funds and growing swiftly in buildings and treasures; and vast collections of products of invention, engineering and industry, each with a building to cost millions, are being projected. Many of the present ones can be called successful, if success be counted in size of buildings, in value of objects and in dollars of income. A few of them seem to be working slight changes in their communities, because a few persons get from them ideas, or incentives to thought, or incentives to study, or new interests, or hobbies, or new sympathies. But the number of persons whose manner of life is influenced by museums is exceedingly small. Even in our largest cities few visit them; very few in proportion to the totals of permanent and transient population; and of that few by far the greater part make visits that are merely casual or simply responses to the call of duty.

Unfortunately no one seems to know precisely how to improve museums. The friend of the museum as it is, of course sees no need for change; and the exponent of the new, has no successful experiments with which to point his theories. The present limitations of our knowledge of what is the effective museum permit us to say quite emphatically that the best imaginings of museum enthusiasts have not yet set before us a clear picture of a museum of full and rich utility.

The word utility suggests that the better museum that is to come will be more useful than are those of the present type. This word useful of course means far more than profitable in dollars and cents. It means influential in moving its community toward greater skill in all the arts of living. "The arts of living" is a phrase that extends in its meaning from clean streets to clean air, from knowing the alphabet to a feeling for high poetry, and from pride in one's city to delight in helping it, even at personal sacrifice, to become a cause for pride.

Assume, now that the promoters of a certain museum set to themselves the task of making it useful in the best and broadest sense; here are some of the many difficulties they will meet in their attempt.

We all move in grooves, and if we have seen a few museums, or have merely read about them, we are sure to have formed in our own minds quite a clear picture of what a museum should be. We have adopted a museum mold, so to speak, and we have adopted also the belief that a museum in our town should fit that mold. This general opinion of what a museum should be stands in the way of the development of a museum which does not conform to that opinion.

All of a museum's possible activities, other than those that fall in with old conventions, must be tried out, in spite of indifference or hostility, before their utility can be said to be proven; and it is not easy to discover that a certain

form of museum activity is worth while, even after it has been tried, since it may please for a time and yet have no enduring value.

These obstacles to the development of a museum that shall fit its community, are obviously products of an ever present opposition to the new; and to fit modern community conditions somewhat of the new is quite essential.

An attempt to answer questions like those which follow, may advance us a little toward an answer to the question, How make a museum useful?

a. Why museums at all?

b. Which of their activities do in fact pay for their cost?

c. Of those that do pay, which would be the more profitable in the average city of this country?

In trying to find answers to these questions certain conclusions come into view, of which here are a few:

Countless changes have put museums of the old type into quite a different relation to their several communities from that which they once occupied. Pictures in books and journals, now found by millions though only by hundreds a few years ago; print on every conceivable subject, and in quantity that in a few decades has grown almost beyond reckoning; vast museums called department stores, which have developed in the last fifty years, where countless objects from all parts of the world are inspected with keen personal interest by millions every day; daily contact with products of the

invention and the industry of a scant two generations—these alone make a new environment for the museum and put it into a quite different place in daily life from that which it occupied a few years ago. Indeed, they do themselves make of the passing show of the world about us a fascinating museum, and one that is before our eyes every waking moment. Perhaps, then, good reasons are lacking for the existence of most of the institutions of the old type that are still called museums?

Visitors to museums are so few, compared with the vast number of contacts by the whole populace with these new influences, that, in the great majority of cases, their effect on their several communities is even slighter than it used to be, in spite of the vast growth of museum collections and of the great advances made in the arts of housing and presenting those collections. The extension of our contact with pictures, print and objects that carry to every one the suggestions and the information that formerly came from museums only, has made the world indifferent to the impact on their vision of even the rarest and most costly of the objects, however beautifully installed, that the museum can offer. This obvious fact, of the growth of an indifference to the museum's treasures due to an increase in the interest of the passing show and to the presentation of so much of what a museum offers through print and picture, has been seemingly almost ignored by the conventional museum official. He thinks to regain lost standing in the

field of world attractions by adding rarer and more costly objects and by using in presenting them, regardless of cost, countless new devices, arrangements and settings. He even adds the art of music to the allurements of his objects, as if his institution may properly draw visitors by appeal to their ears, in the expectation that a slight aural intoxication will tend to make more welcome and more keenly appreciated a collection of objects which were gathered solely to exalt through the eye. But patronage of museums is not increased by these methods, and does not grow, even in due proportion to the size and richness of collections or to the increase in number of possible visitors.

We can go further and say that in spite of the efforts made by museums to hold some of the slight power to attract which they once enjoyed, their influence wanes. Fashion papers and journals on sports, houses, furniture, gardens, architecture and what-not are guides so universally followed, that examples set by museum collections have no appreciable influence on public taste or current interests.

The goods displayed in shops of every kind follow in style and character the lead of the journals—and they, of course follow the lead of fashion autocrats—and not the lead of any museum's display of objects.

Some venture to say that the effect of the presence in an art museum of masterpieces in the arts, though subtle, is inevitably great, is deeply penetrating and is highly influential in the long run. Proof of this statement is lacking.

Others continue to insist that the value to artists in any line of creative work, of opportunities to see authentic products by the world's masters of design and craft, is in itself alone a good and sufficient reason for the expenditure of no matter how great sums to secure and properly to house and display these masterpieces. With this statement, though its truth awaits demonstration, one may be moved somewhat to agree. But one should at the same time insist that, while one of the things for which a community, wishing to disclose to the world its wealth and its deep interest in expensive and ostentatious art productions, quite naturally spends freely on a collection of the world's masterpieces in all fields of art, the harm that such collections may do to the impulse for art production can scarcely be over-rated.

Art production demands, perhaps above all other mental activities, invention; invention that comes out of the social and other conditions of the time in which the invention appears. If, now, a community collects art masterpieces of earlier days, and by the manner of their display and by the ostentatious and fashionable patronage of them by the rich and influential, proceeds to arouse in its several units the faith that they—the old masterpieces—are the last words in all the arts, then does that community thereby paralyze in large measure the inventive power in artists. It tells them, the artists, that the best possible has already been done, and that all they can now hope to do is to imitate, copy, or adopt and slightly modify the old. That is, the

community in question has developed in its units, by an over-insistence on the value of the old and accepted, the habit of always looking in the art products of their day for likenesses to old masterpieces, and has thereby created an atmosphere in which inventive talent, the basis of all art, can not possibly flourish.

This statement of how museum pieces tend to inhibit art production may be put in this way:— Nothing is more harmful to the rise of art impulse into the act of creation than established and accepted standards; and the rare and precious masterpieces of museums are too commonly accepted as standards by the community as a whole and, in consequence, by would-be artists.

The old type of art museum, then, if the statements just made have in them a fair measure of truth, is not helpful in promoting interest in art, study of art, or appreciation of art, and in fact tends to hinder the development of these three movements of the mind. Every prosperous town and city can well afford to maintain a collection of the best examples obtainable of the art ejects of other days and other peoples; but these collections should be looked on by the several communities that collect and maintain them, not as the last words in the field of art production, not as things to be slavishly worshipped or followed; but as an interesting story of man's efforts through the ages to add something new, attractive and suggestive to the routine of life.

Communities which have acquired museums of art should

remind themselves continually of the fact that a museum is fundamentally an effect and not a cause; is the outcome of interests and desires which have little to do with the discovery and patronage and development of taste, of art talent and of the creation of beautiful things. A large, well equipped museum in Athens, 600 B. C., had such a thing there and then existed, filled with what the rich and influential considered to be the masterpieces of earlier peoples in Egypt, Crete, Persia and other lands, would probably have made quite impossible the flowering in the following two centuries of the Greek art we now admire.

Museums of art now spend large sums on exploration in the field of archæology; but while it is not easy to have anything but praise for exploration in any and all fields, we find that this exploratory activity is not a part of those activities of a museum that come within the range of the present questionings.

The explorations are largely archæological and ethnological. They disclose to us the development of many forms of art in remote times and in civilizations that have passed; and they tell us, with no small degree of detail, how one people after another, each working out for itself, in an isolation which we can not clearly picture and can not use at all as a condition of our own art development, evolved a method of design somewhat peculiar to itself as a product of its own manners and environment, but always touched by the influence of its own past efforts and by the kindred

designs of other peoples with whom it came in contact.

Large and wealthy museums, perform a certain educational service in that they develop expertness in some of their curators. In a few cases it may plausibly be said that only by taking advantage of the opportunities which a curator's work affords, can a desired expertness in certain fields be acquired. But the expertness is usually that of knowledge, criticism and comparison and almost never that of production. Of books produced on all aspects of art, so few are the outcome of education by curatorial work in museums as to make the claim that museums develop their workers into useful experts seems not well founded; this in spite of the fact that it is quite a common saying of museums, that even though they do not instruct the public, they do at least entertain and improve their curators.

A city should adorn itself. It should not only keep its streets neat and clean, supply itself with good water and construct ample sewers, set up beautiful parks, build plenty of attractive schools and wear always that air, hospitable to learning, wisdom and art, which has distinguished the world's best cities; it should also take on certain material indications of culture and refinement, such as libraries and museums. Much is to be said in favor of a city's following the good examples of its noblest fellows and putting on the garments of wisdom and refinement, even though it does, in its secret heart, take little thought of them and no pleasure in their contents and activities. An attractive museum building is

a profitable investment for any city, even if the museum within is asleep, or is merely teaching itself and not helping others, and its outside only is all that stirs civic pride. Here is a good argument, however, not for the establishment in a city of a museum of a certain useful kind; but merely for the erection of a seemly building which shall, in its outer aspect, have the conventional marks of a museum's home. This home may be useful, even if it be so merely by virtue of its presence as part of the beautification of the city, serving only as a piece of architecture and not as an active and helpful organism. And, merely as a building, it quite commonly leads collectors to place in it certain of their treasures. So doing, it may be said to serve a second useful purpose; but it still does not exert a direct and persistent influence on the artistic agitations of the members of its community. And again it must not be forgotten that duly venerated museum-pieces, collected and housed by a city, inevitably tend to develop in that city the feeling that it has done well and nobly and generously by art when it has bought and enshrined the art of other days; and at the same time, tend to check the growth of the feeling that, for the production of art by themselves, they must sympathize with the creative spirit in themselves and patronize eagerly those who display it.

The mention of the presence of a museum building as an incentive to giving, brings to mind at once the well-known fact that this incentive leads to actions that are by no means

always helpful to the development of a useful museum organism. Many of the gifts that are made to it have little value save in the opinion of the givers. Many have no small value in the auction room; but little or none as part of a living and doing museum. And many, though of great beauty in the opinion of a small group of specialists, can not make for many years, if ever, any moving appeal to the general public or arouse emotions that lead to good actions. Indeed, one of the obvious hindrances to the growth of a museum's influence in any of the fields in which it is usually supposed to be at work, lies in the fact that it is choked by a flood of gifts. The moment a museum is safely and attractively housed, gifts begin to come to it. The larger and richer it is the more numerous and the more valuable are the gifts it receives. And the more rare and valuable are the objects offered to it, the more insistent is the general opinion that they be accepted. And again, the more valuable the gifts—valuable in the sense of market price—the more essential does it seem that the museum employ experts for their identification, their labeling, their cleaning and repairing, and their installation for public inspection; and also the more essential is it that they have ample space for their display, that they be adequately guarded when on display, that there be suitable vaults or chambers for their storage when not on display, and that they be suitably described in handsome catalogs and that no pains be spared to have them adequately exploited in the public press.

All these things make heavy calls on the museum's income for maintenance; and that income is almost invariably unable to meet all the demands made upon it. Most museums are poor. No matter how large, important and valuable their collections, they find their free income, the income which can be used to meet current expenses, is much too small. Donors have a grievous habit of earmarking their gifts of money for certain definite purposes. Perhaps one of the chief reasons why large museums, rich in collections, fail to put their collections to more active and more effective use in their respective communities is that they have no funds they can employ in developing that use. They are impoverished, so far as concerns funds for the enlargement of the influence of their treasures, by the very profusion itself of those same treasures. And too often trustees are entirely satisfied if the museum in their charge is notorious for what it owns, and are not troubled by the fact that it is not at all esteemed for what it does.

One may admit that a museum's trustees are in duty bound to accept all worthy objects that are offered to them. In the commonly accepted theory of museums is thoroughly embedded the principle already outlined, that good things that come into a museum's possession must be preserved; and quite as thoroughly embedded is the accompanying principle that good things, once they are accepted, must be studied, labeled, cataloged, put into perfect condition and displayed in a dignified and refined manner. But, while

these principles are being carried out, the museum ceases to function,—in fact in most cases never arrives at the functioning stage of its existence. From a study of the life histories of museums one is compelled to conclude that, granted a fairly adequate and wisely located building, a museum can be of highly effective service to its community with a collection of carefully chosen objects costing only ten thousand dollars, if it has at the same time a staff of workers whose annual payroll is a hundred thousand. If its collection and its payroll be in the reverse of that relation it can not hope to rise above the status of a gazing museum of the most lifeless kind.

Objects are silent. They must tell about themselves, their origin, purpose, their relative positions in the development of their kind and countless other details through labels, guides and catalogs. Labels, guides and catalogs can be written to attractive and useful ends only by students of the art of presentation who are in some measure endowed at birth with a touch of this same art. Experts may give the facts, but the expert is rarely found who can so present the facts that the reader is moved to an interest and appreciation by them.

It is not necessary to explain that the museum with a high payroll and few and inexpensive objects will be a museum of brains and not merely a collection of museum pieces! Brains of a certain specific kind have not been thought to be the prime essentials in a museum's equipment. To this

it may be replied that the possession of much special knowledge in any field of art does in itself show that he who possesses that knowledge is a person of brains,—which is true enough. But the brains needed for the adequate management of a museum—such management as will cause it to be obviously influential in arousing interests, developing tastes, encouraging learning and making the units of the community it serves producers of things that have charm as well as utility,—must possess far more than expertness in any part of the art field. The brains of the well-equipped museum should include such as are those found in successful commercial, manufacturing and transportation enterprise. The managing of a museum is primarily a business. It should be in its management as independent of a board of trustees as any successful business is of its board of directors. As a business it should be managed as a unit, as is a business. The manager and his aids, having received from their board of directors general instructions as to the fundamental purpose of their work, and information as to the money available therefor, should proceed to use their imagination and their skill in analysis to discover what is the conduct that will best enable them to arrive at the ends desired.

The usual process of art museum development is far different from that here suggested. A community having determined to set up for itself a museum of art, at once adopts a set of conventions regarding it. As it is to be an

art institution it must have a home like homes of similar institutions in other cities. The trustees do not even raise the question of the fitness of such a home for a museum of art. They feel that they know instinctively that what has been done heretofore should here and now be done again. With what this home shall be filled is also not a question, for precedent has already settled that point also. Nor is there any doubt as to the character of the site for the home. As it is but a copy of an ancient temple or a ducal palace, it must of course enjoy the seclusion which distance can give it. And they proceed to follow the ancient conventions. Being fearful of using opinions and imaginings of their own or new notions that may be expressed by others, they dare not deviate from the ancient ways. Hence it has come about that a few worthy, and usually wealthy, citizens, entirely unfamiliar with the whole problem of public education, and with no experience in or knowledge of the difficult task of promoting art interests, of encouraging local talent in design, of leading a community to care for and patronize creative imagination in the field of beautification, guide the founding and the development of museums of art as we see them today. The one thing that has been thought to be sufficient to a museum's existence is the rare and costly object. The delusion has long been held, as already noted, by both wealthy and poor, by both learned and ignorant, by travelers and stay-at-homes, that museum pieces need only to be seen to produce in those who see them a certain

elevation of soul, a definite impulse to better living, and a beautiful and helpful broadening of the mind.

Of course there is no truth in this theory. The French are not leaders in the fine arts and the arts of thought because they have rare, beautiful and wonder-provoking objects in their museums. They simply are the kind of people who lead in art and thought; and being such, and having been such for several centuries, they naturally possess museums into which they have gathered art and archæological treasures; and just as naturally they have supplied their country with beautiful monuments by sculptors and architects.

The Italians have lived for several centuries surrounded by the finest products of human genius in the field of art. Since the days when, being inspired in a manner which is past understanding, they produced the treasures of the renaissance, they have not, by those treasures, been re-inspired.

The formula for producing artists still awaits discovery. The evidence seems ample that no essential part of that formula can be the presence, in rather remote and rarely visited and quite oppressive and almost gloomy buildings of high architectural endeavor, collections of what have come to be referred to as museum objects.

This should be said, lest the comments just made be too grievously misunderstood:—the French, having become possessed, out of the gifts of circumstance and time, of a

certain genius, proceeded to produce certain objects of beauty in a score of fields, and thereby demonstrated the excellences of their souls. And that is well. And now, the people of this country, the citizens of any city of ours, just as soon as they feel or can be led to think they feel, an urge for the beautiful or an interest in art, should proceed to display some material exponent of that feeling. They should, for example, establish a museum of art and fill it with beautiful things. The psychologists tell us that it is quite as true to say that we are angry because we strike a man, as it is to say that we strike a man because we are angry. A city adorns itself with a museum, and thereby shows that it is moving toward fine feelings.

The museum and its contained treasures set up by a city are plain demonstrations of that city's growth in grace. But, the museum and its museum objects do not, merely by being present, arouse that indefinable movement of the social mind which the French enjoy, and the Italians now lack, and we Americans are taking on very slowly.

Of museums in the science side of life and study it is not easy to be critical. The science museum which, a few decades ago, found the creations of Mr. Barnum to be quite in the method which they were adopting, has now become an admirable stimulant to learning. The science enthusiast in the museum field is not usually of the belief that if nature's products and methods are set out in proper cases the mere sight of them will not only arouse wonder

and awe, but will also equip the observer of them with the power to interpret nature's ways. He does not quite accept the art museum enthusiast's faith that the beauty of accredited art objects enlarges and ennobles the spirit (whatever that phrase may mean) of him who gazes upon them and that therefore his own collections will discover and arouse the spirit of free inquiry.

The science museum collects, identifies, classifies, notes relations, searches for sequences and causes, and arranges things collected, with the student and inquirer in view. But no sooner has this work been done than the teaching motive seems to make itself felt, and the museum adds, to its purely preserving and arranging activities, such activities as may arouse interest, inquiry, observation, collection and research, especially in the young. It is safe to assume that the growth in influence on thought, belief and conduct of museums of science will be very rapid.

The industrial museum has been highly developed in Germany and Austria. Vast buildings have there been filled with objects illustrating the development of appliances of every kind, from knives to airplanes and from wheelbarrows to locomotives. The museum of this type is just now in great favor. The history of invention in this country and of the progress of mechanical engineering are perhaps soon to be concretely illustrated in large and expensive buildings. These projects are most engaging, largely because they will form memorials and exaltations

of the forms of activity in which our country most properly takes pride. As a country, we are so rich that the cost of collecting the material for a few national museums illustrative of our industrial progress, and of identifying, labeling and installing and guarding the same, will be of slight moment. But beyond being somewhat to which we can point with pride as we pass by them, they can not avail much. Most museums of all kinds are too large to produce definite effects on visitors. And vast storehouses of machines and of objects showing the steps in invention by which the machines were reached, will surely weary and overwhelm the great majority of visitors. They can with difficulty be used in teaching and inspiring the young. They will be out of date, as far as progress is concerned, even before they are opened.

If it be wise—as it perhaps is—to attempt to make adult Americans more pleased and proud of the mechanical and industrial achievements of their countrymen; and if it be wise, as perhaps it is, to arouse in the young of this country an interest in the doing of all kinds of things, from the driving of a nail with a hammer to the construction of a motor car, then the proper tools with which to attempt these two things are wise and skilled instructors, guides, docents, expositors, or whatever you may call them, placed in a large number of small, easily moved and easily changed and easily renewed and brought-to-date collections of industrial machines and industrial products, chosen with great

care from the tens of thousands available as best illustrating certain rather typical activities. A few hundred dollars—given a suitable space for their display—will set up a series of objects, and a few machines that will, at the hands of clever teachers, do more to arouse, in a few weeks, in several thousand young people of a given community, an interest in an occupation, an understanding of its elements, an appreciation of the conquests its promoters have made, a respect for manual labor and a certain openness of mind toward industry than can the huge museums of the type now proposed.

This last statement seems hardly to need any proof. But it can be proven by calling attention to the ease with which, in narrow space and with limited funds, such subjects as Clay and its Products, Cloth and its Making and Use, the Republic of Colombia and "The People of China," have been made interesting and instructive.

Special museums, such as those of medicine and surgery, the Indian, Spain, need not be here discussed. They are quite distinctly for interested and informed students of their respective subjects, and are not established for the delectation, information, and awakening of the general.

The changes brought about in manner of life, interests, occupations, diversions, and information by inventions and discoveries in the last few decades have as yet produced little change in the general theories on which museums of art, science and industry are conducted. Museums began,

on the art side, as collections of objects brought together and arranged and installed for the pleasure of wealthy and powerful individuals. They were not open to the public. When, in the changes time wrought, they were brought under the ownership and direction of the populace, they retained most of their old features. They were housed in structures which were intended to be stately and were usually repellent or austere or uninviting, or all three, to the commonalty; they were made remote, partly to permit a monumental form of exterior and partly to make it clear that they should be approached with some reverence and visited with a complete suspension of the critical faculty. The art museums were supposed, and are still usually supposed, to be capable of developing in the populace by a few visits a certain susceptibility to environment and a certain permanence of impressions which would cause genuine beauty to be by them thereafter recognized and loved. The supposition has not been verified by experience, but is still held.

The science museum began modestly with curiosities, the unusual in nature's productions; went on to the collections of long series of nature's products in special fields, useful to a few specialists; and then slowly added objects, quite as scientific but of more popular interest. In a word, they began as accumulations of things merely curious, went on to things so scientific in selection and arrangement as to be of interest only to the expert, and then began to be popularly

instructive. They now tend to overwhelm by size of building and quantity of things shown.

Teaching is now common in museums; though it still takes a small part only of the annual cost of maintenance. But it expands rapidly and is so generally accepted as an essential part of a museum's activities, that we find quite proper the suggestion of a museum which shall greatly reduce the attention it gives to the casual gazer and shall be frankly an agency for supplying suggestions along definite lines in answer to definite inquiries, or for arousing in casual visitors more than a casual interest in the objects they see.

J. C. D.